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William M. SCHNIEDEWIND, *The Finger of the Scribe. How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, 15,6 × 23,5, 236 p., ISBN : 978-0-19-005246-1.

1 William Schniedewind is Professor of Biblical Studies and Northwest Semitic Languages at UCLA and his interest in the treatment of orality and textuality in ancient Israel is certainly nothing new. In his previous work *How the Bible Became a Book? The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge, 2004), he already dealt with the social and historical context surrounding the composition of the Bible. With this new book, however, the author insists on examining the Bible from a practical point of view, this time regarding it not only as a written text but as a text created by trained hands (or fingers). Such an approach, nourished by archaeology and comparative literature from the whole of the ancient Near East, is particularly welcome in biblical studies where, for centuries, the Bible was conceived as words fallen from the sky. This trend, which is fortunately increasingly common, is part of a wider movement that tends to "humanize" the history of the Bible and "normalize" – to quote Mario Liverani's historical manifesto [1] – the history of ancient Israel. If one does not bear in mind such a double perspective, which converges into one horizon, Schniedewind's work would be no more than a challenge based on scant evidence.

2 While his previous book started with the questions "when was the Bible written?" and "why was it written?" (p. 1), in this one the author takes a step back and explores the preliminary stage: "*how* was the Bible written?". To answer this, he focusses on the period when scribal education was emerging in ancient Israel, the models it followed,

and the possible parallels between scribal exercises found by archaeologists and biblical passages. Over the last few years, similar attempts have received much attention, especially thanks to new archaeological discoveries and new interpretations of already well-known evidence, as became the case with the scribal activities at Deir ʿAlla and, more recently, at Kuntillet ʿAjrud. However, as the author pinpoints, the general feeling is still quite pessimistic in terms of our knowledge of the scribal system in ancient Israel. On the contrary, Schniedewind's approach is more optimistic.

3 Featuring indexes, a good amount of useful figures reproducing the objects discussed and many transcriptions of textual excerpts, the book is composed of seven chapters followed by an epilogue. In the first chapter, the author not only provides an overview of the state of the art, but also presents the book's two key notions. The first one is William Morrow's "vector of transmission" that refers "specifically to the physical mechanism by which literature or an educational curriculum could have been known and transferred from one culture to another" (p. 9). It is in this concept that the author manages to find the missing link between scattered epigraphic records and an institutionalised scribal education. Hence, the author's claim is that "the rubrics of early Israelite scribal education were adapted from the Mesopotamian school tradition at the end of the Late Bronze Age" (p. 18). Despite the fact that Southern Levant was directly dominated by Egypt in this period which, for instance, resulted in the adoption of hieratic numbers or the use of ink in local inscriptions, the author is right to emphasise that local scribal education was based more on the Mesopotamian school tradition than on the Egyptian one. Consequently, the second key notion is Niek Veldhuis' outline of the progressive Cuneiform School curriculum, which shapes chapters 3 to 7, after chapter 2, of course, which is entirely dedicated to the inscriptions from the site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud.

4 Although extensively exploited for the reconstruction of the eighth century religious aspects, these inscriptions had, up until now, received only little attention as witnesses of scribal activities and training. This is something the author aims to reverse by providing, for the very first time, "a holistic interpretation" of Kuntillet ʿAjrud "inscriptions as an interrelated corpus" (p. 23). In other words, throughout the book, the author interprets the epigraphic material – from the repetition of single letters and abecedaries to the theophany text, encompassing lexical lists, blessings and letters – as scribal exercises which were part of the scribal learning of soldiers located in this fortress in the Negev.

5 The next few chapters focus on the increasingly complex skills demanded of an Israelite scribe during his training, and on the comparison with those demanded of Egyptian or Mesopotamian pupils. These exercises encompass abecedaries and acrostic compositions (ch. 3), lists and their integration in literary texts (ch. 4), letters and other kinds of written messages, prophecy included (ch. 5), proverbs (ch. 6), and more advanced exercises such as legal traditions and religious texts (ch. 7). These chapters also constitute an overall collection of the epigraphic records connected with scribal training in ancient Israel and of their corresponding parallels in the Bible. In particular, the parallels analysed by the author have the merit of resituating parts of the Bible, such as acrostic compositions, oracular or prophetic messages, lists or proverbs and particular word choices or expressions to their original *Sitz im Leben*, scribal practices. Moreover, once the scribal nature of these elements has been acknowledged, another aspect emerges. Given that the scribal curriculum was the same in the whole Levant

and that it was essentially based on the Mesopotamian model, it is no longer striking that the same scribal features are found in biblical literature, in ancient Israelite epigraphic records or in any other inscription from all over the Levant. The author, therefore, provides readers with many of these parallels from Levantine inscriptions.

6 All in all, while one can understand the important role given to Kuntillet ʿAjrud as the place that should bear witness to the existence of almost every element of the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum in ancient Israel, one may quibble with some of the author's innovative interpretations or may at least regard them as somewhat conjectural. The presence of lexical lists, an expression that seems, to the present reviewer, more a formula than a proverb as the author states (p. 38), or the theophany text interpreted as a mere scribal exercise, run the risk of coming across as contrived interpretations. In any case, the author is correct in stressing the non-religious character of the site and the role of the army in the diffusion of basic literacy. He is also right in assuming that the inscriptions on the *pithoi* are mainly scribal exercises, where one can also recognise the red ink used by a trained hand and the black ink for those who were learning. However, the plaster inscriptions could be considered differently and not as part of the scribal curriculum. The existence of scribal training should not rule out the possibility that other kinds of inscriptions existed at the same site. This is a place where travellers spent their nights in the desert during long and dangerous journeys and probably left behind "true" religious inscriptions, not just scribal exercises.

7 Another element that may raise some doubts is the exclusive focus on the transition between Late Bronze Age and Iron Age. While it is beyond any doubt that this period played a central role in the dissemination of the Mesopotamian scribal model in the whole of the Levant, during the Iron Age this model did not continue in a vacuum, thanks to a sort of inertia movement. An essential element missing from the author's historical context is the palace, that is, the backbone of all scribal activity and training, the genuine *reason d'être* of all these activities. In overlooking this, the author probably underestimates the role of the political power(s) in continuing and adapting the scribal practices and in creating new regional networks among the local interlocutors. For this reason, the author describes each aspect as a far reflection of the Late Bronze Age imprinting, by often evoking the conservative nature of scribal tradition. Once again, this may be true, but the pitfalls of explaining what we do not know with what we know are all too evident. For instance, the fact that we ignore almost everything about the Phoenician scribal practices, probably carried out on perishable support such as papyrus, does not mean that they did not exist. Indeed, other scribal curricula did exist and continued to adapt the Mesopotamian one. Also, other possible and documented influences – Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian or Persian – are but briefly presented while, on the contrary, they most probably had an impact on the already existing scribal traditions.

8 At the end of the book, it remains unclear how a Late Bronze Age scribal mode, which survived during the Iron Age, "taught scribes to write the Bible." Beyond the legitimate marketing effect of the subtitle, the author prudently refrains from drawing chronological conclusions from his main thesis. However, just as he did in *How the Bible Became a Book?*, he described an emerging literate society in ancient Israel already in the late Iron Age (eighth-sixth centuries BCE), one wonders whether the implicit goal of this new book was also to advocate an earlier date for the first drafts of the Bible. This

being true, the author limited this proposal to a mere suggestion without entering into historico-critical considerations and using the telescoped notion of "Bible".

9 In any case, the book fulfils its main purpose and provides a useful and thorough insight into a Levantine Iron Age scribe's toolbox. Although some eternal pessimists will regard the author as exceedingly optimist, a little optimism never killed anyone. This work will certainly contribute to shifting the discussion on the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions toward horizons other than the history of ancient Israelite religion(s). The whole book is, therefore, a precious reference for scholars and students interested in the contextualisation of biblical literature as an integral part of the ancient Levant.

NOTES

1. M. LIVERANI, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, London, 2005 (ed. or. Roma-Bari, 2003).

AUTEURS

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ERC Mapping Ancient Polytheisms (MAP - 741182) – PLH-ERASME (EA 4601) ; université Toulouse Jean Jaurès